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ABSTRACT

A behaviorally oriented approach to facilitate marital satisfactions is presented in this paper. The underlying rationale of the approach is presented and discussed. Furthermore, the author describes the use of the following intervention techniques: change facilitating propaganda, specification of the behaviors desired to be facilitated, reciprocity contracting, charting, behavior rehearsal, and modeling. (Author)

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A Behaviorally-Oriented Approach to Facilitate Marital Satisfaction

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Paper presented at American Psychological Association meeting, 1975 at Chicago

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In a recent text on marital and family counseling (Hardy and Cull, 1974), it was estimated that one out of each four marriages will end up with a divorce. Furthermore, statistics from California, a state which typically foretells national trends, indicated that the divorce rate is one out of every two marriages for the general population and in some urban centers, the rate is closer to four divorces for every five marriages. It seems as though the unhappy marriage leading towards divorce may be becoming the norm rather than the exception.

I would like you to now fantasize a clinical conference perhaps ten years from now where upon hearing that the client has been married to the same spouse for over 15 years the clinicians may likely make the following inferences--e.g. clear evidence of rigidity, stereo typed personality patterns, fixation, phobic reaction to new, emotionally, close situations, etc. All because the poor "slob" has been married to the same spouse for a long period of time!

I make this observation for primarily two purposes: (1) it serves as an amusing and hopefully provocative opening to my talk and (2) it leads me to the point that the approach and techniques I will discuss today are <u>not</u> viewed as panacea that if employed will lead to happiness and satisfaction for all. All I am saying is that I, with my particular set of personality characteristics, have found this approach and related techniques to be quite effective in the treatment of marital dyads in which both members are willing and committed to improve their level of satisfaction in the marital relationship.

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I consider myself a behaviorally oriented practitioner in that (1) the procedures I employ are derived from such traditional principles of learning as positive reinforcement, modeling and behavior rehearsal; (2) My goal in therapy is to change specific behaviors and not to make "global" personality changes in the individual. That is, my goal is not to change a spouse described as a "cold fish" into "Mr. Warmth", but only to get that individual to increase the frequency of a number of defined verbal and nonverbal "affectionate" behaviors; and (3) my focus is on the present and future, and not on the past. In practice, I spend little time exploring the types of problems that have brought the couple into therapy. My tendency is to jump directly to such questions as: How would you like your relationship to be different from the way it is now?, How would you like your spouse to be different?, How would you like to change?

My conceptualization of the marital dyad is similar to that recently expressed by Stuart (1969), Liberman (1970) and Azrin, Naster and Jones (1973). Individuals involve themselves within a marital contract for the dyad promises a greater amount of reinforcement than the nonmarried state. To the extent that reinforcements are provided at acceptable levels for each member of the dyad, the marital partners experience satisfaction within the relationship and the likelihood of further maintenance of such a relationship increases. A disruption in the reinforcement process between the marital partners leads to dissatisfaction, anger, divorce and in some cases, an appointment with a marital counselor. Within this framework, the overall role of the counselor is to increase the frequency of reinforcement for each spouse in the dyad. The approach towards reinforcement that I take is similar to such concepts as Stuart's (1969) and Azrin, et al (1973) "reciprocity", Jackson's (1965) "quid pro quo" and Masters & Johnson's (1970)

"give to get". That is, each member of the dyad is impressed with the idea that by providing reinforcement to your spouse, this serves to reinforce your spouse's attempts at providing reinforcement to you. For example, if John wants his wife to spend more time talking with him after dinner and Betty wants John to be more verbally affectionate, John's increased attempts to be verbally affectionate will serve to reinforce Betty's attempts to increase his after-dinner conversations. And vice versa! Thus, a reinforcement reciprocity system is established.

With this background, let me briefly relate to you some of the things I actually do within the therapy situation. First, I find it quite helpful and facilitative to present to the couple my behavioral orientation. Many individuals come into counseling with the idea that their behavior and the behavior of their partner is fixed. "I'm shy. I was always shy and I will always be shy." or "He's not affectionate. He was never affectionate and he never will be affectionate." I find that the orientation that behavior is learned, that it can be unlearned and new behaviors can be learned in its place, is hopeful, optimistic and generally facilitation towards change. Explanation of my behavioral orientation helps in a second way. By presenting the concept of reciprocity, it focuses the partners <u>not</u> only on how they would like each other to change, (most couples are good at that upon entering therapy) but it also highlights the importance of changes in their own behavior. Thus, "if you want your spouse to change, you must change to reinforce your partners attempts at change". Again, this focus serves to facilitate the therapeutic change process.

A second important component to my therapeutic intervention concerns getting the couple to define <u>specific behaviors</u> they would like to see in their spouse that would serve to increase the satisfaction they are experiencing within the marital dyad. Rather than working with such

goals as asking their partner to be more affectionate or sociable, these global goals are discussed in such specific behavioral terms as "I want my spouse to kiss me when he or she comes home from work." or "I want my spouse to talk with me after dinner rather than directly leave the dinner table." Once the specific behavioral changes desired by each spouse are determined, a "deal" or contract is negotiated within the reciprocity framework. For example, John may agree to kiss his wife upon coming home from work if she agrees to stay with John after dinner and talk with him (and vice versa). I often find it quite useful to formalize such agreements by having the couple actually write up the negotiated agreement in the form of a contract and then sign it. In general, teaching the couple to specify clearly their wants and then to negotiate for them within a reciprocity framework appears to be a "learning" that can help the couple in their relationship with each other long after the actual therapeutic intervention has terminated.

Monitoring, or to use another term "charting", is a technique I often employ in my work with couples. Depending on the specific circumstances, I may have each member of the couple record the frequency in which their partner carries out the contract or I may have the partners keep track of their own behaviors related to the agreed upon contract. Furthermore, I find monitoring most useful when a member of the couple finds specific aspects of the relationship difficult to handle. For example, if Betty finds it difficult to express verbal affection to her husband, I may have Betty keep a chart of all those times when she wanted to express affection but was unable. (e.g. she felt too uncomfortable) I find the mere act of self-recording to facilitate such behaviors, and furthermore the specific details of the situation are recorded and thus can be brought into and dealt with in the therapy session.

Finally, I make much use of the techniques of behavior rehearsal and modeling. For example, if making affectionate statements is a problem for one member of the couple, I will have that spouse actually practice and rehearse making such statements within the therapy situation. Furthermore, I (and the other partner) will often function to provide reinforcement for the spouse's attempts, to provide corrective feedback and perhaps even to model various ways of expressing the desired affection. This rehearsal process serves the dual function of desensitizing the spouse to the uncomfortable behavior being dealt with, and providing that spouse with an opportunity to increase his interpersonal skill.

This paper serves as only a brief explanation of my approach to marital therapy and as a potpourri of the techniques I generally employ. I hope this information will be useful in your own clinical practices and I would be most interested in hearing about similar innovations and techniques that you have found facilitative.

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